[Umbrella Pat]

Mari Tomasi Recorded in Writers' Section [?]

DATE: SEP 21 1940 Men Against Granite

UMBRELLA PAT

February snow was piled high in the park square. A bright sun melted the snow from the elm branches, so that the park sounded with a cheery drip-drip. An old man sat on a corner bench where he could match the life of Barre on the main street—from the granite bank facing the park to the dingy wooden and brick business blocks.

A policeman stopped beside the old man. “This is Pat McFinn,” he said. “He's been in and out of Barre these forty years-"

“Forty-five,” Pat corrected with a friendly smile, as the policeman swung down the walk. “I remember that fellow's grandfather,” Pat continued. “He was my age. With all my bumming around and poor living I've outlived him by fifteen years. Them days they didn't have kids for cops- or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe the young men seem like kids to me just because I'm old-"

Pat was an old man. Wisps of hair fell white and silky beneath the corduroy cap. He needed a shave. His cheeks were pink as a baby's under the white bristles. In that old face the eyes were strangely young. China-blue, and fragile looking. His slight frame appeared weighted by a old-fashioned black ulster that hung down to his ankles. His mittened hands played with the knobbed head of a walking cane.

2

Two graded school children in snowsuits were walking the path on skiis skis. Pat's china-blue eyes followed their progress. “When I was a kid I was choice of winter sports. I'd

rather ski or snowshoe one day than swim in the brook all summer. Nowadays kids have store things for their sports. The only skis I ever owned were made from a couple of barrel staves off my old gent's cider barrel. We made straps for them from an old halter. We'd grease the staves with bacon rind, and they'd take us where we wanted to go. Couldn't use them much except on moonlit nights. The old gent put us out to work when we was thirteen. Me, and three brothers. He was one of them hard-working, hard-praying, hard-drinking men. Didn't lay no stock in kids enjoying themselves. Not during the working-day hours. Then come night, he'd fetch us in for prayers and bed at nine o'clock. Didn't leave us much time for enjoying our-selves."

Pat's voice was tremulous and low. An old man's voice. Ye a youthful eagerness crept into it.

"I came over from Ireland with the family when I was seven. The old gent used to tell how he happened to make the trip. We lived in one of those small Irish villages you read about. A village that's owned and run by one rich guy. Well, this rich guy had an old-maid daughter-homely as the ace of spades,—so the old gent used to say- and she took a fancy to my father. My father had no special trade. He used to hire out to farmers. Odd jobs. Mostly clearing their fields and pastures of stones. He hauled so much stone he got stooped from it. Did a little blacksmithing, too. The old gent didn't give a 3 damn for the old maid, so he used to say. Why should he, when he had a wife and four kids? But this old maid, she'd follow him to the fields every day, and when her father heard of it she lied and said it was my father that was pestering her all the time. The rich guy was mad, I tell you. He had influence in the village. Got so the old gent found it hard to find anyone to hire out to.

"Then one morning the rich guy finds a load of stones in his rose garden. Dumped right onto his bushes. He laid it to the old gent, said he'd run him from of village. That same night he took awful sick from a mess of fish he'd eaten. He discovered that the old gent had caught then and sold them to his cook, and he began peddling it around that my

father was trying to poison him. Everyone in the village was dependant on him one way or another. He gave them all orders not to give even an hour's work to my father.

“Father Gilligan came to the rescue. He'd heard my father talking about coming to the States someday. What does he do but borrow from some of his wealthy friends and stake the old gent and family to the trip over here. He told my father as how he'd gone through Barre, Vermont, the year before and that it looked as though it was going to be a mighty prosperous town with all the granite they was digging from the hills.

“Don't remember much about the trip over here except that we lived for a couple of weeks in a room with about twenty-five other people. We could hear machines close to the room, and chains rattling. At night we'd wake up to people snoring, or moaning, or making sick puking sounds. It was too much for my 4 mother. She lost the baby she was carrying two weeks after we got here. The old gent used to say: 'God bless Father Gilligan, he's a good man. I'll say a Hail Mary for him every day of my life. I'd gladly say two for him if he'd dug deeper into his pocket and given us the extra for better passage.... The old gent paid him back every cent.

“We came straight to Barre. My father found work in the quarries. We lived on a farm in East Barre. Hard work and hard drinking got him in the lungs. I was thirteen then. He put me out to work by the day for farmers. He didn't want any of us near the sheds or quarries.

“The trip over here gave me a taste for travel. I run away from home when I was fifteen. Me and the grandfather of that cop you was talking to. We went broke in Bristol, Connecticut. We got jobs in a buckle factory. Wasn't hard work, and it sure felt good not to have to turn over my salary to the old gent.

“I'd been there about a year when I got brass poisoning in my hand. It swelled and got green and rotten looking. The doctors talked about cutting it off. Pat laughed. “Rotten looking or not, I wouldn't let them. No sir, not Pat McFinn. Pat McFinn was going through life with two hands, or he wasn't going through life at all. It's a good thing I didn't let them

do their butchering. Look.” Pat pulled off a mitten, and held up a wrinkled, heavily veined hand. “Lookit, just as good as the other.

“Later I wandered down south a bit. Got myself in the army for a few months. Didn't like that. Didn't like the food 5 nor the hours. I kind of liked to be my own boss even in those day. I run away from them. Run right away from the government, and I never heard no more about it.” Pat chuckled. “Run away from the United States Government, and heard nothing of it.

“There was a colonel's wife at the army post who asked me to mend a silk umbrella for hers. She got me to thinking of my mother and how she'd always wanted a black silk umbrella with a pearl handle like the rich guy's wife used to own in Ireland. Well, when I went back to Barre for a couple of years. I brought my mother the umbrella. But she was dead. She'd died the day before. I walked in the front room where she was laid out in her coffin, and I laid the umbrella alongside of her under her skirts. I didn't wait for no funeral. I took to wandering the country again. But I couldn't get my mother off my mind. I thought of her and the colonel's wife's umbrella I'd mended, and I got to thinking of what my mother used to say: everybody's got to have some kind of a job to keep him from going to the devil...

“Well, right then I got me the idea of mending umbrellas. Earning a little money as I traveled along. I wasn't married. Never intended to be. I got no use for women. A woman would've been a nuisance on the road. I've mended umbrellas ever since. Umbrella Pat, they call me.

“Remember that song that come out last year about mending umbrellas. First time I heard it I felt it was written for me. Heard it in a department store. I was going to buy the record, then I thought: hell, t'won't do no good without a victrola. So I asked the girl at the handkerchief counter if she'd just 6 soon write out the words for me. They all know Umbrella Pat.

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“Did a whale of a lot of traveling in the old days. Last twenty years I've stuck pretty close to Barre, Montpelier, and Waterbury. Always believed in drinking. I've heard say it kills folks. It hasn't killed Pat. I've outlived plenty of my friends. Wasn't never particular about my liquor, either. I'm near eighty and I've drunk nearly every liquor that flows. Sure, I like good stuff. But once I'm drunk and broke I'm not fussy.

“I got me a room in the Passetti Block. Not much of a room. It's warm and comfortable. Old Passetti died three years back. He was from the Old World, too. From Italy. Came over here and started a grocery store. Raised a family of eight kids. Educated them all well. There's doctors and teachers in his family now. Old Passetti lived to build a business block and buy up six or seven houses. The kids are well off now. The oldest girl, Marietta, is about forty. She's got three kids. She still looks after the roomers. She looks after me, and she's good to me. She scolds like hell when I'm drinking. Couple of months ago she made the rounds of the dime store and the department stores and told them not to sell me any bay rum or canned heat.

“Every year she sees that I make my Easter duties. I'm a Catholic. Not a good one. But I'm not a bad fellow. Drink a lot, sure, but I don't do no one no harm.

“Last year I was on a two weeks' drunk. I slipped and broke my leg. I happened to be in Montpelier at the time. They took me to the hospital and kept me there two months. 7 “After that I went to the poor farm. Had to. Couldn't stand on my leg. I couldn't earn a living. Two of my brothers are dead. Third one might be dead, too. Haven't heard from him in fifteen years. I was all alone. I had to go to the poor farm. I got out as soon as I could. I don't like charity. I don't want charity. No, sir. I'll pay that poor farm back. No one's going to say Pat took charity.

“I got me a five-hundred dollars insurance. That's two hundred and fifty dollars more than the funeral of Pat McFinn is worth. I'll turn the other $250 over to the poor farm. I don't want charity.

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“I get old age pension now. I don't call that charity. The leg never healed the way it would if I was young. It's hard for me to get around from house to house. I got along all right with the pension. When the check comes, I give Marietta her rent money right away, and the rest, well- I guess I drink it.”

Pat's china-blue eyes smiled. “It's a pretty good life. I'm not kicking. When I need a little money I go out and sharpen a few knives and scissors. Folks aren't wanting their umbrellas mended any more. In the old days umbrellas was expensive. Folks hung on to them, mended them to make them last. Now you can buy them anywhere for a dollar. It spoiled my business.

“I haven't bought a suit of clothes for eight years,” Pat announced proudly. “Women folk take a liking to me. I don't know why. I'm certainly not handsome. They take a liking to me like they did to the old gent. I sharpen a couple of knives and a pair of scissors, and first thing you know the woman'll 8 go digging in the attic for her husband's old clothes. This ulster was given me a month back. I don't call that charity. It's no money out of their pockets. It's just clothing that'd go to waste if I didn't use it.

“Years ago I'd stop at the sheds and they'd always have something to sharpen. That's all past, too. Each shed's got her own smithy these days. Well, life's like that. You got to keep up with the times. And with yourself. Pretty soon my hands'll be too shaky for sharpening knives and scissors. I won't go on charity even then. No sir. Not Pat McFinn. I'll get me some pencils and peddle them. I've seen one-armed men and one-legged men selling them and they seem to make a living—"